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ABSTRACT

Theories of persuasion have long assumed a process which includes comprehension of the message by the recipient. Several hundred undergraduates at Ohio State University and Marshall University (Ohio) participated in six experiments examining persuasion and the use of unintelligible messages. Subjects in individual cubicles of a university language laboratory were told they would hear talks delivered at a United Nations conference. Subjects listened to a taped message in English and in an unintelligible version. In Experiment VI subjects heard an unintelligible version and a no-message version. An equal number of students heard the tape in reverse order. Subjects responded to standard attitude dependent measures: semantic differentials, attitude scales, and cognitive response measures. Manipulations of message length, number of repetitions, and source credibility were added as an additional between-subjects factor in some experiments. Major findings revealed were that: (1) most subjects agreed with and listed cognitive responses to unintelligible communications; (2) persuasion processes with unintelligible communications were similar to persuasion processes using intelligible messages; (3) an unintelligible communication evinced more cognitive responses and more favorable ratings than a nonmessage control; (4) the unintelligible messages produced increased cognitive elaboration as a function of total number of thoughts generated; and (5) student high in Need for Cognition were more persuaded by unintelligible messages than were students low in Need for Cognition. These results challenge the message-comprehension assumption. (NB)

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PERSUASION WITH UNINTELLIGIBLE MESSAGES: A COGNITIVE RESPONSE ANALYSIS

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For the past seventy-five years all theories of persuasion have assumed a process which includes comprehension of the message by the recipient. The present series of experiments challenged the message-comprehension assumption. Comprehension was found not to be a necessary component of message acceptance. A sea-change in understanding of persuasion processes is seemingly required.

A review of naturalistic observations, survey research and experimentation indicated that persuasion occurs from exposure to unintelligible communications, i.e., without the possibility of comprehension. For example, persuasion occurs during incomprehensible religious ceremony (Williams, 1981), some commercial advertising (Rowsome, 1970), or political appeals (Hitler, 1926/1971), during which message content is largely absent. Human infants first encounter speech as an unintelligible communication (Vygotsky, 1962), and Skinner's (1936) "auditory Rorschach" played unintelligible speech which clinical patients interpreted in personally

relevant ways. Educators have found that a professional actor who "looked distinguished and sounded authoritative" was rated favorably by educators on content-relevant criteria, though his talk was nonsense (Naftulin, Ware & Donnelly, 1973); further, students favorably rate lectures they haven't attended and films they haven't seen (Reynolds, 1977).

A variety of psychological research suggests that humans are persuaded under conditions of unintelligibility: Langer's mindlessness (1978), in which requests were equally persuasive when accompanied by relevant or by irrelevant reasons; anticipatory persuasion (Cialdini & Petty, 1981), in which persuasion occurs simply through the anticipation of receiving a communication; acceptance of commercial messages based on source attractiveness (Leippe, Greenwald & Baumgardner, 1982); and polarization of attitudes, which occurs to the extent one is given time to think about an issue (Tesser, 1978).

In the present research several hundred undergraduates at Ohio State University and Marshall University served as subjects. Six experiments provided direct evidence that unintelligible messages produce message acceptance, and by implication, persuasion. Procedure in each experiment was as follows: Students signed up for a study on "Language Perception and Translation Effectiveness"; were seated in the university language laboratory in individual cubicles, told they would hear talks delivered recently at a conference of the United Nations and heard a taped message in English and then in an unintelligible version (in Experiment VI; an unintelligible version and a no-message version). They read in their booklets "because your personal opinion on the statement may influence your ratings of the quality of the tapes, we need a measure of your own opinion on this issue ..."; and responded

to standard attitude dependent measures (e.g., Petty, Cacioppo & Goldman, 1981): semantic differentials, Likert-type attitude scales and cognitive responses measures. An equal number of students heard the messages in the reverse order. Manipulations of message length, number of repetitions and source credibility were added as an additional between-subjects factor in some experiments.

In Experiment 1, a majority of students provided evaluative ratings and listed cognitive elaborations to a foreign language (Greek) communication which nearly all claimed not to have understood. Experiment 2 replicated the first experiment with a different speaker and extended the effect to a message rendered unintelligible by electronic filtering. In Experiment 3, increased message length did not lead to increased agreement with an unintelligible message but in Experiment 4 increased repetitions of both intelligible and unintelligible communications produced increased acceptance. Experiment 5 demonstrated that increased source credibility produced greater agreement to an intelligible message and to an unintelligible message as well. In Experiment 6 unintelligible messages were shown to produce more agreement and cognitive elaborations than a control no-message condition. Further, the number of cognitive elaborations divided by total thoughts listed was greater in response to unintelligible messages than to intelligible messages.

The main findings were: 1) most university students agreed with and listed cognitive responses to a variety of unintelligible communications (every experiment); 2) persuasion processes with unintelligible communications were similar to persuasion processes using intelligible messages (Experiments 4 and 5); 3) an unintelligible communication evinced more cognitive responses and

more favorable ratings than a nonmessage control (Experiment 6); 4) the unintelligible messages produced increased cognitive elaboration as a function of total number of thoughts generated (in each of the first five experiments, a higher proportion of idiosyncratic thoughts were produced in response to the unintelligible message than to the intelligible message. Experiment 6 did not use an intelligible message); and finally 5) students high in Need for Cognition (Cacioppo & Petty, 1982) were more persuaded by unintelligible messages than students low in Need for Cognition (Experiments 3 and 4).

These robust findings pose a far-reaching difficulty for all models of persuasion that assume that the understanding, comprehension, and meaning inherent in a communication are necessary components of the attitude-change process. The comprehension component was crucial in the influential theories of Hovland, Janis and Kelley (1953) and McGuire (1969) and comprehension has been assumed in the theoretical formulations of Greenwald (1968) and Eagly (1974). But a message that is devoid of meaning, such as filtered speech, or modern Greek (for our subjects), cannot be "understood" or "comprehended" in the sense in which comprehension-based theories use these terms.

Theories that say that comprehension is message-based are the traditional models of social psychology and have served a central role in guiding mainstream research. However, these theories have not been tested in extreme conditions, unintelligible messages, until now. One contemporary formulation, cognitive response theory (Petty, Ostrom & Brock, 1981) could account for many of the present results, although the finding that cognitive elaboration is abetted by unintelligibility appears to undermine a key assumption of routes-to-persuasion (central versus peripheral) theories (e.g., Petty &

Cacioppo, 1981). The present preferred formulation emphasizes own thoughts (Perloff & Brock, 1980) and the results showed that a meaningless message could suffice to instigate sufficient own thoughts for confident reporting of differential message acceptance. The locus of meaning, on which acceptance is based, was not anywhere in the message but in the self-originated elaborations of the message recipient.

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